

Good Stories for Children

By Walt McDougall

Johannes, the Little Man, Tells How Tommy Elfman, Who Disappeared From His Home for Seven Years, Came Back With Untold Riches in His Possession

HAVE seen and talked with an elf! It happened in this manner: I was resting in a remote, lonely woods, when I saw a tiny man with a long white beard coming through the grass, and before he observed me sitting there I called out: "Hi, stop, my friend! I want to speak with you."

He was so startled that he stood still and stared at me instead of running away, and perhaps he saw in my face the assurance that I would not harm him, for his look of fear vanished and he smiled. We soon were on the best of terms, and so it happened that I heard the curious story of Tommy Elfman, the boy who disappeared for seven years and came back to our place a very rich man. This is the story as Johannes, the little man, told it to me:

Tommy as you must know, was a wonderfully bright boy, and stood very high in his class at school, but when he told me all that he had to study I wondered how his head could hold it. At the time this story begins he was preparing to pass his examination for college and was worrying very much about his chance of passing. He was well up in most of the ordinary studies that boys must take in order to go to college; that is to say, in mathematics, physiology, geology, history, literature, chemistry, metallurgy, photography, astronomy, botany, electricity, paleontology, histology, glyptology, forestry, mineralogy, and all the rest, but he knew that he might be easily tripped up by some apparently simple question about something he had overlooked or forgotten. He spent all of his time preparing to answer such unexpected ones as this: "What's the difference between natural ice and unnatural ice?" "Why is it called horse-radish instead of 'cowradish,' for instance?" or "How can you tell a cowslip from a landslip in the dark?" However, he kept up his courage, and, although he studied from 5 A. M. until 11 P. M., he still found time to take a daily ride on his tandem with Herman Wisz, so as to keep his muscles in trim for foot-ball, rowing, tennis, ping-pong and base-ball when he got to college.

Went Out With His Grandfather

One day he went out with his grandfather on the tandem to the pasture, where they were going to blow up an old stump with gunpowder, and while Japhet, the hired man, was boring a hole in the stump, the others sat in the shade watching him work. Tommy, who had been thoughtful for some time, suddenly asked grandpa how the family came to be called Elfman.

"It's a strange and wonderful tale," replied grandpa. "We are called Elfman because almost once in every century one of the sons becomes an elf for a time. I remember my grandfather relating how it happened to him. He awoke one night to find his bed full of elves and suddenly discovered that he was also one of them. He went with them to their home and acquired great wealth, which his son and myself have about spent by this time."

"Why, it's almost time, then, for another one of us to be an elf," cried Tommy, excitedly.

"Just about the time," replied grandpa, "and as you are the only son, I s'pose you'll be the one, if the same fate still works. I'm glad 'tain't me, anyhow."

"I don't think I'd mind," said Tom, "if there's any money in it, for we're dreadfully poor."

"It may still be many years before it happens and maybe 'twon't ever happen," remarked grandpa. "Meanwhile we'll blow up that old stump, as Japhet is all ready."

They blew up the stump, and then hauled it away with oxen, while Tom sat there pondering, with his tandem beside the tree. Something moving in the hole left by the torn up stump caught his eye, and when he looked carefully he was startled to see a little man in brown leather clothes of ancient pattern and a long white beard standing there beckoning to him mysteriously. All that his grandpa had just told him came back to him at once, and he realized that this was an elf. He ran to the hole at once and the elf said:

"Good morning. Are you ready to go with me?"

"With you? Where?" asked Tom.

"To your ancestral home. The time has come for you to fulfill your family destiny and become an elf."

"Why, I won't have time," cried Tom; "for next week I've got to take my examination for college!"

"I know naught about college or examinations, whatever they are, but you can't evade your fate, that's certain," said the elf. "My name is Ludwig and I have been waiting here for you for some

time. You must certainly keep up the custom of centuries, my son, or the bottom will simply fall out of everything. We have been working for you for a hundred years, and we will all be very much disappointed if you refuse."

"How long will it take?" asked Tom, who really was somewhat tempted by the prospect.

"Not long, and the time will pass very rapidly, too rapidly, I am sure."

Well, Tommy said that he would go, and then to his surprise found himself as small as Ludwig, the elf. Looking around he saw, too, that his tandem had shrunk to a very tiny machine, as it leaned against the tree. He went into the hole and found that it led into a long underground passage, where the elf struck a light from a flint and steel and lighted a candle.

"We have a long journey to make," said the elf, "and we must start at once. It's three thousand miles to our home."

"Gee!" cried Tommy. "Then we don't walk! Wait a minute until I get my tandem!"

He ran to his machine and brought it into the long tunnel-like passage, where Ludwig examined it curiously. Tom placed the elf on the back seat, lighted his lamp with a match, which scared Ludwig very much, and they started off. At first Ludwig was much frightened, but soon regained confidence, and began to try to pedal.

"I'm glad," said he, "that you have that wonderful light in front, because if you hadn't we would have to burn candles. They are very precious and now we are saving dozens."

"Where does this tunnel go to?" asked Tom.

"Under the sea," replied Ludwig. "You know an elf can't cross water, so we had to dig under it to provide a way for you. We live in Gesundheit Forest, in Germany, and there the tunnel ends, right at our home, Elfheim-Under-the-Hill."

"It's a fine tunnel and bully for a bicycle!" said Tommy.

"It ought to be, for we have been a hundred years making it," replied Ludwig with some pride. "The visit of the Elfman is the important event in our family, you know, and we live for nothing else nowadays. It isn't like old times now at all, for there are only about fifty of us elves left. The rest have all died and people no longer believe in us, so we no longer do anything for ordinary mortals, as we were used to do of yore."

He Became Silent and Thoughtful

He became silent and thoughtful as they speeded along. Soon they came to a section where the roof of the passage was of the clear crystal rock, called quartz, where sunlight came down through the green sea water and lighted up everything. Tom saw great fish and enormous shells, lobsters as big as barrels and cuttle fish forty feet wide, while wonderfully-colored sea grasses waved solemnly and silently in the coral depths above them. For miles and miles they swept along in this green light, and then plunged into darkness again with only the bicycle lamp to illuminate their way, but Tom noticed bright specks and shining patches on the walls here, and when he asked what they were Ludwig said:

"Gold—all gold. We discovered a new mine when we were making the tunnel, and indeed it's the best we ever struck. I guess we got over a million ounces out of it, and lots of silver and copper as well."

"Where is it all?" asked the boy.

"All in our storehouse. We have a wonderful place. All the gold and silver is dropped into a hole in the roof of a great cavern beneath our home, which hole is guarded night and day by a monster unlike any ever seen, called the Sleepless Quidnunc. We call him 'the sleepless,' but he does go to sleep once in a century or so, and that's when

we take out the treasure for the Elfman, you know."

"Has he shown any signs of getting sleepy of late?" asked Tom.

"Not a bit; he's more wideawake than ever!"

"What does he look like?"

"I can't describe him to you, as he doesn't look like any other animal. He has a long spike in the middle of his back that goes right up into the roof and keeps him anchored there by the hole, or else he would be wandering off and leaving the treasure unguarded. We are all just as afraid of him as possible, for he looks awful and he does make the most dreadful noises, so that our whole series of caves just rock with the echoes. It's like an earthquake!"

Passage Became Very Hot

Soon after this the passage became very hot, so that Tom perspired freely as he pedaled along, but Ludwig didn't seem to mind it. When the boy asked the cause of the heat, Ludwig told him that they had to go so deep beneath the ocean in digging the tunnel that they were very near the red-hot centre of the earth, so that all the rocks were heated intensely. However, they soon began to climb upward, and it was harder work then to push along, but Tommy was now getting great assistance from the elf, who was pedaling like a racer and seeming to enjoy it, too. They passed through beds of coal, lava, granite, limestone, full of petrified trees, leaves, shells and insects, which made the walls appear as if decorated with fine carvings, varied marbles, crystals, amethysts and agates, so that it was just as if he were studying his geology or mineralogy, and he felt that he was really learning more than he would have done by poring over his books. After they had passed under the ocean the tunnel was lifted to a higher level, but had to dip often under lakes and rivers. Yet the long journey seemed as nothing when at last they arrived at Gnome Hall, in Elfheim, a vast cavern, all studded with gems that reflected the light of a thousand wax candles in a dazzling glare.

Here the fifty remaining elves were gathered, waiting, as they had done for months, to greet the Elfman. Great were the shouts of welcome and the cavern vault re-echoed far back into the black depths their glad songs. Tommy felt proud to be one of the venerable band of whiskered little men in stout leather clothes, who now surrounded him and passed a gold loving cup from hand to hand right merrily. Then they showed him all Elfheim, a wonderful place, where there were dark blue lakes with eyeless fish swimming about, deep holes that went clear down to the boiling centre of the earth and others that rose to the tops of the mountains, so that he could see the stars as through a telescope, caves that penetrated for miles and miles into the primeval rocks, as well as gold, silver and diamond mines beyond counting, which, as everybody knows, the elves have worked for thousands of years. They then took him to the great central treasure house, where he saw the Quidnunc on guard. It had a nose like a tapir's, ears like a rat's, the body of a bear, hind legs like a kangaroo's, forelegs like a turtle's, but with sharp claws and a spike on its back, spiral like the unicorn's horn, that went right into the hard rock of the roof. He was watching the hole where they put in gold and silver steadily.

"I see," said Tom, "that he would have to unwind that corkscrew spike if he wanted to get loose."

"Hush!" cried Ludwig; "he doesn't know it, and if he hears you he's likely to try it, and then he'd get the whole lot of us! We dare not go near him while he's awake, but have to pour in the gold with long-handled shovels."

After he had seen everything Tom said: "This is all very nice, but why do you use wax candles to

light your caverns? They must be very troublesome, indeed."

"Why, what else can we light them with?" asked Herman, the chief elf, in great astonishment.

"Electricity, of course," he replied.

"Never heard of that kind of light," Herman said, and then Tom had to describe it, but he failed to make them comprehend.

"I'll fix it for you!" he cried. "Make me a lot of copper wire!"

They went to work making the wire, while Tom made batteries of the natural pools in the caves, and immense ones they were, so that when he was done he could make enough electricity to run ten trolley lines and light four towns. He taught the clever elves to blow the glass bulbs for the lights and soon the whole range of caverns they called Elfheim was one gorgeous blaze of glory, for the diamonds and rubies sparkled more than ever in the electric light. The elves were wild with delight and could not cease from admiring the effect. Then he made trolleys to carry the ore, as well as the elves, along the passageways, after which, seeing that they had only coal fires, which were very troublesome, to melt the gold ore, he made an opening at the bottom of one of the deep wells with a blast of powder, also homemade, and got the red-hot material from the centre of the earth, so that the ore was melted in a twinkling, which saved an immense amount of toil, and for the first time in many years the elves had time to go up above ground and have a picnic in Gesundheit Forest, as they used to do in ancient times.

Every day the elves would go to see if the Quidnunc had gone to sleep, and they would return madder and madder, for it seemed as if the animal had determined to stay awake forever. Finally Herman said: "I don't know what we will do! It will take a long time to carry all the treasure over to Tom's home in America and we certainly ought to be at it now."

"I'll dispose of the Quidnunc in two minutes if you want me to, with one good shock of electricity," said Tommy.

"Oh, we can't kill him, for who would guard the treasure?"

"Oh, after all," said Tom, "he's not much of a protector except against elves, for when you come to think of it he's no larger than a kitten, in a man's eyes."

"I never thought of that," said Ludwig; "but it's a fact."

To Get at the Gold

"However, I'll fix him so that we can get at the gold if you are in a hurry," said Tom.

He surrounded the Quidnunc with a live wire, so that he couldn't make a dash at any elves going in or out of the treasure hole without getting a jolt that hurled him off his feet, and after he got two or three such jolts he went back and lay down. Then they got out all the treasure, and while they were doing it Tom made a trolley line along the passage beneath the sea, so that it was very easy to send it all home as fast as the cars were loaded. It took a long time to get it all out, and Tom was very glad when one day Herman said to him:

"Now, shortly you will become a man once more and you'll leave us. I think that you ought to remain outside in the forest after this, for it would be awful if you should suddenly change and get caught down here. I hate to think of digging an opening big enough to release you if that should happen."

"Very well," replied Tom; "but before I go I will mark out the size of our friend, the Quidnunc, on the ground outside, so that when I do change into a boy again I can dig him up and take him with me."

"Yes, and you must take some gold up with you, so that you will have money in order to pay your passage home," said Herman.



THEY SHOWED THE QUIDNUNC ON GUARD

With the Aid of a Good Fairy He Met He Found a Great Gold Mine Which Was Entered From a Big Tunnel Leading Far Out Under the Sea

So, after that Tom remained above ground and slept in a small hut that some woodsmen had deserted. Several days passed. One morning he heard a rustling in the bushes, and, seeking its cause, he discovered a beautiful maiden, with torn and discolored dress, trying to force her way through the dense thickets.

He forgot his elfin size and cried out:

"I will help you, maiden! Come with me!"

The girl looked all about her and at last saw him. She started back, then cried: "It is an elf!" She didn't seem much alarmed as he ran to her and asked her why she was alone in that dense forest. She told him that she was the daughter of the King of Kartoffelsalat, who had placed her in

charge of a one-eyed giant because she refused to marry a prince from Achduler, whom she despised. She had escaped from the giant's castle, but she was sure he was seeking her everywhere, and for three days she had fought her way through the gloomy forest.

"I will try to help you," said Tom. "Come into my hut and rest while I get you something to eat." He called to Ludwig, who soon provided a feast for the Princess Viola, but while she was eating it she started back in great fright, staring wildly at Tom.

"What is the matter?" he cried.

"Oh, you are not an elf! You are a man!"

Sure enough, the change had come, and so quietly that Tom did not know it. He told the Princess not to be alarmed, for now that he was a boy again he could help her better.

"Oh, but you are not a boy at all! Look in my little mirror!" she said.

He looked, and lo! he had become a man! Ludwig came in just then, and when he was questioned he admitted that in the seemingly short time that Tom had been in Elfheim seven years had passed, and so Tom was really a man.

"Now I can never go to college at all!" cried Tom.

Told Him Never to Mind

"Never mind; you know enough, it seems to me, anyhow, and you've got so much money it wouldn't matter if you knew nothing at all," said Ludwig. "I wish you would go and dig up the Quidnunc at once as you promised." Tommy went instantly to the spot he had marked on the ground above the animal and soon dug him up, as he was only a few feet under the surface. The Quidnunc struggled, but as he was so small he could do nothing, yet all the elves were much frightened. While Tom was holding him up to show him to the Princess they all heard a great noise, and the next moment the giant, with one eye in the middle of his forehead, strode up. He saw the Princess and Tom, and bent down to grab them, but Tom dropped the Quidnunc as he sprang to the side of the Princess and the fierce little beast leaped up into the air and drove his spike into the giant's eye and into his brain. He fell dead right then and there. Tommy pulled the animal away, but he saw that the giant had expired. The Princess was filled with joy, for now she knew she was safe from the Prince of Achduler. The elves made a cage of wood for the Quidnunc and then Tommy started for home. He had no more adventures and reached the seashore not long after, where they took a ship for America, which they reached in less than a fortnight. He got home in time to pay off the mortgage on the farm, which was just about to be sold at auction, and then went to the stump hole and began to take out the gold. He found all of the elves there, they having come on the underground trolley, and soon they had all of the treasure in the house. There was more than a hundred big Saratoga trunks full of gold and ten of diamonds, so if you are as good at mathematics as Tom was you can figure out for yourself just how many millions there were. They sent the Quidnunc to the Washington Museum, where everybody can see it, for it was too much trouble to take care of, as it was continually drilling holes in things and forever scaring people who came to ask Tommy to invest some money in their enterprises.

The elves visit Tommy quite often now, and so we may, after this, expect to see them in our American woods frequently, just as I did, and I am very glad of it, as we needed something of the kind here so as to be able to tell elfin tales.

I almost forgot to say that Tommy married the Princess Viola, but you would surely have guessed it yourself, anyhow.

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